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*A probationer is handcuffed in his home as he submits to questions and a breath alcohol test by officers from the county's DUI Enforcement Team. (Photo by Bill Wechter - Staff Photographer)*

**REGION: Probation unit supervises 'worst of the worst' DUI offenders**

**By COLLEEN MENSCHING - Staff Writer**

In the living room of a small blue house in Vista, a tanned man with cropped hair sits on the couch and tells the officers that all of his problems stem from drinking.

Stanley, a father in his 30s, is one of approximately 700 people supervised by a Probation Department unit, the DUI Enforcement Team, that handles "the worst of the worst" of the county's drunken driving convicts.

Their status subjects them to surprise visits at home, where officers handcuff them, quiz them about their alcohol and drug use and have them take breath alcohol tests.

On a recent Monday night, a team of three probation officers in a silver mini-van made nine such visits in North County, including one to Stanley's house.

"This caseload includes the probationers at the highest risk to reoffend," said officer Gonzalo Mendez, who heads the unit. "You don't get on this list by having just one DUI."

Some on the list have four or more DUI convictions, Mendez said. Some might have one conviction for driving while intoxicated, but fled from police and were slapped with a felony charge, he said.

Others were involved in crashes that seriously injured or killed another person.

The unit first took to the streets in August 2006 with the approval of the county Board of Supervisors and the help of a \$1 million grant from the state's Office of Traffic Safety. That grant was renewed earlier this year.

In the meantime, the team of about 10 officers has made more than 9,000 contacts, performed more than 2,200 searches and administered nearly 14,000 drug and alcohol tests, according to county statistics.

For Mendez, the motivation to keep those numbers high comes from the loss of a brother and an uncle. He volunteered to head the special unit after both relatives were killed in separate accidents caused by drunken drivers.

Mendez stores a picture of his uncle's truck after the wreck ---- nearly unrecognizable ---- on his office computer.

"If I'm tired, I just look at this picture and say, 'OK, time to go to work.' "

Officer Rob Frejek also volunteered to work with the DUI unit. Though his family hasn't been directly affected by drunken driving, Frejek said he shared Mendez's passion.

"The randomness of DUI really moved me," Frejek said.

Though the average home visit lasts about 20 minutes, they can run longer if probationers or their families are uncooperative, or if the officers spend some time counseling.

One of the men on Frejek's caseload is Stanley, who said he had his first alcohol-related run-in with the law at age 18.

A young boy and a puppy answered the door at Stanley's house during the most recent visit.

Stanley had praise for Frejek ---- "He's the type that wants you to get out of the system" ---- but was less positive about probation in general.

"I think it's great, other than them coming over and handcuffing me when my kid is at home," he said dryly.

Stanley said he's staying sober mostly through the help of a church, where he now works with members struggling with alcohol abuse.

But Mendez maintained that the probation department must be doing something right.

Only about 2 percent of probationers under the unit's highest level of supervision have been rearrested for drunken driving, Mendez said.

Of those nine Monday night visits, only six people on the caseload were home ---- but all of them were in compliance with the terms of their probation, Mendez said.

"If you're not drinking and driving, it works," he said. "Probation works."

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